

Baby boomers reeling in the years

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People in their 60s are the group most likely to feel younger than their age.
Credit: Thinkstock

It's long been said that you're as old as you feel. Now a group of researchers is looking at how the concept of "subjective" age might be used to manage the wellbeing of the baby boomer generation.

The researchers, from Australia and the US, have developed a model for measuring age that takes into account social, mental and biological factors, not only how many birthdays have passed.

Individuals, potentially with the help of their GPs, may one day be able to measure themselves against this subjective age index.

If it reveals weakness in any of the three key elements – you may be more socially isolated than the average 60-year-old, say – steps could be taken to improve that area of your life. The aim is to "time bend" to achieve a lower subjective age than your birth certificate shows.

"We see this as becoming a great aid in healthcare, as a diagnostic tool that can assist a move away from reparative medicine to rejuvenative medicine," says Dr Bruce Perrott, a senior lecturer in marketing with the Business School at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS).

"Within the next three decades, Australia, like other Western countries, will experience a lift in the numbers of people in older age brackets," Dr Perrott says. "Many healthcare systems will strain to keep up. Insights into subjective age have the potential to help us improve quality of life for an ageing population and ease that burden."

As specialists in the science of consumer behaviour, Dr Perrott and researchers from the University of Massachusetts Amherst are interested in how people's values affect their decisions, including their choices about how they manage ageing.

"One value among baby boomers is that they want to be forever young, and they'll do absolutely everything they can to stay young," says Professor Charles Schewe of the University of Massachusetts.

"One of the things they can do is keep their mind thinking that they are

younger. So the question for us, as marketers, as healthcare providers, is how can we provide mechanisms for them to get to that end?"

Studies have shown that lowering your subjective age improves quality of life, reducing health issues and even adding to lifespan, the researchers say. "In one longitudinal study, it was shown to add 7.5 years to life," Professor Schewe says.

The chief executive of the Council on the Ageing NSW, Ian Day, says his 90-year-old father regularly used the line that the only thing wrong with his retirement village was the number of old people there.

"It's that concept of, 'my body may say I'm 75 but I'm going to keep trying to behave like I'm 25'. It's when you finally say, 'I'm going to start acting like a 75-year-old' that you really start to age," Day says.

The research team, which includes Professor George Milne and doctoral students David Agogo and Fatima Hajjat of Massachusetts, broke down the factors of subjective age into how old you feel, how old you look, and how "old" your interests are.

They then developed an extensive questionnaire that asks things such as how often you walk briskly for 20 minutes, how often you carry out physical tasks you believe others your age cannot do ([biological factors](#)), how often you forget appointments, how often you wonder whether you've used a word correctly (mental factors), how often you speak to more than one person at a social gathering, and how often you introduce or connect people (social factors).

This subjective ageing index has been tested in the US and Dr Perrott plans to replicate it in Australia. Among the findings so far are:

- Only about 1 per cent of people feel their actual age

- The average person feels about 13.5 years younger than their chronological age
- People aged in their 60s are the group most likely to feel younger than their actual age.

Dr Perrott is particularly interested in the concept of "self-balancing" behaviour, the theory being that older people who lose something – such as a degree of manual dexterity – will compensate in another area, by doing something else that makes them feel younger.

"It's been observed – though not empirically proven – that people considered by others to be ageing successfully tend to take up as many activities as they give up," he says.

Dr Perrott hopes that, as well as potentially providing a [diagnostic tool](#), the research will inspire policymakers to create programs that encourage healthy lifestyles at each of the critical life stages.

Day says the research underlines the fact that there is great diversity among older people, including how "old" different people of the same age feel. "They are regularly bunched together as a homogenous group but they definitely are not."

Provided by University of Technology, Sydney

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